

# ABSTRACT

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### ETHICAL DECISIONS IN TWO DIFFERENT WORKS OF

### CHARLES WADDELL CHESNUTT

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Charles Waddell Chesnutt, an African-American educator, lawyer, and author, was concerned with issues of the color line in his works. This paper discusses two of his short stories.

In “The Sheriff’s Children,” the protagonist, Tom, is a mulatto boy whom Sheriff Campbell, Tom’s father, sold with his mother when he was a baby. Tom is accused of murdering Captain Walker, who is described as the “best” white man in Branson County, NC. The townsmen decide to lynch Tom who struggles to escape.

“Her Virginia Mammy” is a short story about a mother and daughter who find each other after twenty-three years apart. The protagonist, Clara, is a biracial orphan who tries to solve the mystery of her parentage and ancestry.

Charles Chesnutt wrote these works with white audiences in mind. He romanticized his characters’ difficult ethical decisions related to racial identity to illustrate more dramatically the consequences of their oppression.

ETHICAL DECISIONS IN TWO SHORT STORIES OF  
CHARLES WADDELL CHESNUTT

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

“He saw that he had owed some duty to this son of his,--that neither law nor custom could destroy a responsibility inherent in the nature of mankind” (“The Sheriff’s Children” 36).

Charles Chesnutt wrote many short stories which one can find in his famed collection, *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* (1899), using the post-Reconstruction South as the setting. This paper addresses two works from this collection. These two short stories focus on the characters Chesnutt uses to teach readers lessons about how people make moral decisions and how these experiences in the stories shed light on the struggles of African Americans in the post-Reconstruction South.

“The Sheriff’s Children” is set in Branson County, North Carolina, a place known for its racism. The story’s protagonist, Tom, is a mulatto boy whom Sheriff Campbell sold with his mother to South Alabama when he was a baby. Tom, who happens to be Campbell’s son, is accused of murdering Captain Walker. The townsmen decide to lynch Tom; however, Tom struggles to escape from the lynching. Tom, his father, and Polly, his half-sister, make different difficult choices. Polly shoots her half-brother in order to save her father’s life. The sheriff realizes his fatherly duty and decides to let his son escape from the lynching. Meanwhile, Tom removes his bandage to bleed to death to make his father feel guilty because he does not come to his aid.

“Her Virginia Mammy” is a short story about a mother and daughter who find each other after twenty-three years apart. Clara, the story’s protagonist, is an orphan of mixed race whom a German couple adopts and who tries to solve the mystery of her parentage. While telling Mrs. Harper, a black woman, her adoption story, Clara inadvertently reveals to Mrs. Harper that she is her daughter. Clara, however, thinks that she is white and feels that in order to marry her love, she must know her ancestry to make sure that her parents were white. Mrs. Harper discovers her daughter’s desire to be white and marry John; therefore, she sacrifices her happiness for her daughter’s. Rather than reveal the truth, she tells her daughter that she is her mammy instead of her mother. She confirms for Clara that Clara is the daughter of white parents. In this case, Clara, Mrs. Harper, and John make different decisions. Clara refuses to marry John until she resolves her ambiguous parentage. Mrs. Harper’s decision is to hide the truth for her daughter’s happiness so that Clara can marry John as a white woman. Although John realizes the relationship between Mrs. Harper and Clara, he still intends to marry Clara even though she is mixed-race.

In the two stories, “The Sheriff’s Children” and “Her Virginia Mammy,” children invoke feelings of compassion; they tell their stories about the conditions of African Americans. In “Chesnutt’s African American Child Characters and the Child-Archetype: Toward Reconstructing Thinking in the Jim Crow Era,” Susan Wright notes that “Chestnut was aware of what white readers were ingesting; it behooved him to be so if he hoped to use his fiction to appeal to whites, first, to acknowledge their role in oppressing Blacks and, second, to reconcile that problem” (16). Chesnutt thus writes stories in which

grown-up characters grapple with ethical decisions after children teach them life lessons. These decisions can be earth-shattering. Some characters in both stories demonstrate racial preferences that encourage their passing as white as well as the mental damage that they subsequently experience. Different characters face situations in which they struggle to make appropriate choices. In depicting biracial children and circumstances that require moral choices, Chesnutt gives the reader a clear view of bigotry in the United States during this period of time. Additionally, these stories can remind modern readers of the issues resulting from extreme prejudices of the Jim Crow era.



## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Charles Waddell Chesnutt was an African-American writer of the early nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Chesnutt was born in Cleveland, Ohio on June 20, 1858, the son of free blacks. His family returned to Fayetteville, North Carolina in 1877 where he worked part-time in the family's grocery store and attended a school that the Freedmen's Bureau founded. His financial need forced him to begin a teaching career in Charlotte, North Carolina in 1872. He was granted the Spingarn Medal in 1928 by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People for his literary work for the benefit of the African-American civil rights battle. He centered his works on prejudice toward black people and aimed his writing toward white audiences.

Many literary scholars have written on Chesnutt's works. In her preface to the collection of essays, *Historicizing Imagination: Performance and Reality in the Works of Charles W. Chesnutt*, Susan Wright explains that contemporary scholars attempt to understand Chesnutt's work for its creative historicizing of the relationships between whites and blacks in the Jim Crow South. Chesnutt wants white readers to understand the emotional turmoil many African Americans experience, but he also wants to prepare both African Americans and white Americans for change. He wants African Americans to gain true equality, and he wants to make white readers truly accept African Americans. Chesnutt's portrayals of biracial characters serve this purpose. Wright states, "The

veiling effect of Chesnutt's fictionalization of miscegenation allowed readers to ignore the ocular proof of the practice while being forced to scrutinize closely the heartache and violence it perpetrated" (8). Wright explains that white Americans in the post-Reconstruction era ignored the reality of interracial relationships even though this situation is prevalent. Chesnutt brings these relationships into his readers' imaginations.

A number of writers have specifically analyzed the issues of miscegenation in Chesnutt's stories, "The Sheriff's Children" and "Her Virginia Mammy." In the article, "Chesnutt's Chinquapin County," Lena M. Whitt summarizes the story: "Captain Walker, a hero of Gettysburg, has been murdered, and a young mulatto suspected of the crime is caught by a posse and placed in the county jail. An attempted lynching is prevented by one man, Sheriff Campbell; yet the prisoner dies in his cell that night" (53). Chesnutt presents multiple conflicts in the story. The Sheriff wants to be fair with the prisoner before he knows the prisoner is his own son. Tom, the protagonist, is in fact his son from his "former slave girl... [and] Campbell sold her and her young son, Tom, to a speculator on his way to Alabama many years ago" (53). Whitt argues that Tom does not feel guilt when he raises his gun to shoot his father. Whitt suggests that Tom wears a mask: "Upon his recapture, the mulatto goes behind his 'black mask': His bravado had given place to a stony apathy. There was no sign in his face of fear or disappointment or feeling of any kind" (qtd. in. Whitt 53). Also, Whitt posits that Tom chooses to bleed to death because he does not trust the sheriff of the county to offer him a fair trial: "He had no faith in the civil justice likely to be given a Negro suspected of killing the town's hero" (53). In Tom's position, he knows that the townsmen will not give him a fair judgment.

Therefore, Whitt argues that Tom will die; he chooses to end his life rather than face lynching by the mob.

Critics also examine the stories' portrayal and critique of racism. In the article, "Family Matters in the Fiction of Charles W. Chesnutt," William Ramsey describes "The Sheriff's Children" as "[Chesnutt's] most mordant story of mixed race, [in which] we see a brilliant strategy of assault on the erasure that was his family's personal history" (33). The story's critique of racism is highlighted through the ultimate death of an arguably innocent mulatto character. According to Ramsey, "The mulatto son is direct evidence of a spurned race's presence in America, indeed as part of the White family" (34). Ramsey also notes that the sheriff, Tom's biological father, is ultimately responsible for Tom's death. The Sheriff sold Tom into slavery, profiting off his own child. The narrative reveals that "[d]ifference crumbles before likeness, but not before Tom kills himself in a rejection not of his blackness but of his sinful father" (34). Additionally, Ramsey states Chesnutt does not erase the difference of whiteness and blackness; he wants to solve the racism between them. Ramsey argues "Chesnutt's motive clearly is not self-erasing, bourgeois assimilation. It is to destabilize fixed racial categories through assertive black agency" (34). According to Ramsey's position, Chesnutt portrays the gun in the story as a symbol of power. When Tom picks up the sheriff's revolver, he can judge through it; he can compel the sheriff to allow him to escape. In other words, "the point is that only social power, symbolized in the gun, can enforce or negate the false, arbitrary opposition of Whiteness to blackness" (34).

In addition to power, Chesnutt also addresses madness in his short story “The Sheriff’s Children.” In the climax of the story, Tom picks up the Sheriff’s gun and aims it at the Sheriff, threatening to shoot. Describing Tom as he aims the gun at the Sheriff, Chesnutt writes, “[i]f the man was not mad, he was in a state of mind akin to madness, and quite as dangerous” (“The Sheriff’s Children” 33). In the article, “‘A State of Mind Akin to Madness’: Charles W. Chesnutt’s Short Fiction and the New Psychiatry,” Mary E. Wood explains Chesnutt’s depiction of madness in his fiction. Wood states, “This is not the only story in which Chesnutt makes reference to madness; insanity emerges either as a central trope or on the periphery of the main story in much of his early short fiction” (189). When Tom picks up the sheriff’s gun, some scholars see it as merely an act of madness, which Wood argues, “[i]n Chesnutt’s fiction takes on a more powerful set of meanings when read in the context of race-based psychiatric theories of severe mental illness that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century” (189). Wood posits that Chesnutt’s depiction of Tom’s act as akin to madness, although not actual madness, challenges the stereotypes of the time. She writes, “These breaks in character and story are ‘akin’ to madness because they invoke not innate mental aberration but historical memory” (190). Circumstances and history drive Tom to near-madness.

P. Jay Delmar also analyzes Tom’s action in the story. However, he focuses on the theme of the mask in “The Sheriff’s Children.” In the article, “The Mask as Theme and Structure: Charles W. Chesnutt’s ‘The Sheriff’s Children’ and ‘The Passing of Grandison,’” Delmar highlights that the theme of the mask shows “how both Whites and Blacks are constrained to hide their true personalities and often, their true racial identities

from themselves and each other” (364-365). Delmar considers that the sheriff “wears the mask of duty and morality” (367). According to Delmar, the sheriff had not lost the instinct of fatherhood, that he had only hidden it under the “code of the southern aristocracy” (367). When the sheriff faces Tom, he sees himself for the first time reflected in Tom. Tom, on the other hand, is caught between two worlds, the black and white worlds. He rejects his black identity but is unable to identify as white. Delmar claims that Tom’s state of anger results in a confusion of his mask. He is unable to wear a mask of whiteness. Delmar argues, “[Tom] has grown rebellious as a result of his inability to wear a mask which appears to him to be not a mask at all but rather his true spirit. He feels that he is being forced to wear a mask of Blackness” (368). Part of the story’s mask structure is the tragic outcome. Tom’s mask of blackness and the sheriff’s mask of duty result in Tom’s death. Delmar writes that the resolution is tragic “because both figures are basically noble men whose personalities reveal weakness which lead to their downfall” (368).

June Socken continues the exploration of the tragic mulatto in Chesnutt’s works. Whereas Wood and Delmar analyze Tom’s actions, in the article “Charles Waddell Chesnutt and the Solution to the Race Problem,” Socken is primarily concerned with the role of the sheriff in the story. Socken points out that Chesnutt uses the theme of an irresponsible white father to heighten and personalize the tragic outcomes for the mulatto child. Socken notes that Chesnutt portrays his mulatto characters as ordinary human beings with tendencies to make mistakes and to struggle just as anyone else would. However, they are also “bound by the White man’s value system” (53). Socken asserts

that Chesnutt's focus on mulatto characters intensifies awareness of the hypocrisy of racism. Centering on the mulatto brings forth the desperate position of their black counterparts. Socken succinctly points out that "Many of Chesnutt's stories became real tragedies when the reader realized that, as difficult as the position of mulattoes was, the status of their Black brothers, whose skin color doomed them forever to oblivion, was even greater" (53).

"Her Virginia Mammy" also portrays a mulatto character's encounter with her parent. However, Clara, the protagonist of "Her Virginia Mammy," unknowingly meets her Black mother. Clara is a girl who searches for answers to the mystery of her parentage. She must confirm that she is white before she can marry John, her love. She believes that she solves the mystery through Mrs. Harper's story of her white parents, and the story ends without Clara learning that Mrs. Harper, a Black woman, is actually her mother. In the article, "Charles Chesnutt's Cultural Exchange: Race and the Reading of Melodrama in 'Her Virginia Mammy,'" Karen M. Chandler discusses how "Chesnutt's story illustrates melodrama's capacity to speak to different audiences by presenting and affirming conceptions of character and moral values that would seem to be diametrically opposed" (6). Chandler discusses how Chesnutt's characters face moral decisions. In "Her Virginia Mammy," Clara's moral dilemma over her parentage and her marriage to John is melodrama. Clara constantly ponders her heritage and wonders if she is truly white. The story, set in 1899 during the post-Reconstruction era, is aimed at white readers. Chandler comments on the effects of Clara's moral predicament in the story, especially concerning white audiences: "In particular, 'Her Virginia Mammy' advances

two conflicting moral perspectives: one overtly challenging white readers' assumptions about racial purity, the other more subtly upholding the importance of African Americans' racial pride, solidarity, and historical awareness" (7). By employing melodrama, Chesnutt is able to engage with audiences emotionally while challenging their assumptions.

In the article, "Narrating the Family in Charles W. Chesnutt's 'Her Virginia Mammy,'" Jennifer Riddle Harding observes, "'Her Virginia Mammy' is a story of reunion—and of thwarted reunion. In Charles Chesnutt's tale of a mother and daughter finding each other after twenty-three years apart, it is clear that the mother recognizes her daughter, but unclear whether the daughter recognizes her mother" (309). The mother, a black woman, loves a white man and has a daughter from whom she is separated after the steamboat sinks. A German couple adopts Clara who grows up thinking she is white. According to Harding, Chesnutt has Clara accept her mother's tale because he wants to give the reader a lesson in the moral decisions mixed-race people had to make (309). The mother chooses to allow her daughter to pass as white. For Harding, this story illustrates the effect of the color line on separating mother from daughter "and the complications and perplexities of [mulatto characters'] lives in the North and South after the Civil War" (309). Harding focuses on how the reunion that could occur between mother and daughter does not happen---the mother sacrifices her role for her daughter's racial status. Mrs. Harper allows herself to be lowered in status to Clara's "Mammy." Harding explains that Clara "in wholeheartedly accepting the tale her mother has devised, . . . aligns herself with the mythology of plantation families and Whiteness itself" (310). However, Mrs.

Harper's carefully constructed tale of Clara's birth reveals to the reader the real truth underneath the story that Clara hears. Mrs. Harper's moral sacrifices enable Clara to become engaged to John, but not without informing the audience of the full nature of the relationship.

In the dissertation, *An Analysis of the Fiction of Charles W. Chesnutt*, Harold J. Bruxvoort states that Chesnutt presents the results of interracial relationships. Bruxvoort discusses how Mrs. Harper's discovery that she is Clara's mother results in a moral dilemma. According to Bruxvoort, "She must now make a moral choice: to tell Clara that she is her natural mother, reclaim her, and thus shatter Clara's dreams of marrying John Winthrop, or to tell Clara that she was a mammy who accompanied Clara's family on the ship" (39). Mrs. Harper sacrifices her happiness to help her daughter build a happy future through her marriage to John. Bruxvoort also writes "[John's] decision indicates that Chesnutt offers a glimmer of hope that persons of mixed-race will be accepted by Whites into the main stream of American society" (40). John decides to marry Clara even though he realizes she is mixed race; this position makes the reader feel hopeful for the future of biracial people. Chesnutt's hope is that people of color will gain their rights in American society.

This moral choice by Winthrop is very difficult for him to make because earlier in the account he had commented to Clara about the difficult role for persons of mixed-race in American society. He states, "One would think . . . that the Whitest of them would find their position so painful and more or less pathetic; to be so White and yet to be classed as black . . ." (39). His willingness to marry Clara is a sign of progress for acceptance of all



racess in the United States (40). Bruxvoort makes clear that Winthrop's decision to accept Clara's racial status is a moral one; Winthrop represents Chesnutt's own hope for the future of racial justice.

Each of the scholars discussed here analyzes Chesnutt's complicated illustration of race relationships and the color line in the post-Reconstruction South. These sources form the basis for this paper's analysis. They show multiple conflicts illustrated in Chesnutt's works such as racialized masks, the injustice and racial dislocation of mixed-race people, and the indecision of the parents of mulatto children. They also show Chesnutt's efforts to disrupt racial stereotypes, his characters' struggle to be true to their racial identities, and how the tragedy of racial expectations influences his characters' decisions. Each character makes decisions to perpetuate or alter the norms of the color line.

### CHAPTER III

#### ETHICAL DECISIONS IN CHESNUTT'S "THE SHERIFF'S CHILDREN"

Chesnutt opens the story "The Sheriff's Children" with the setting, the town of Troy in Branson County, North Carolina, which is situated in "a sequestered region" in "one of the most conservative States of the Union" ("The Sheriff's Children" 25). Branson County is a typical rural southern community in the post-Civil War era. Branson is seemingly a perfect southern rural community where white people help each other and black people "know their place." Chesnutt chooses to give readers an overview of this setting because it is essential to the plot of "The Sheriff's Children." The author reminds the reader of what one could expect in a small southern town after the war. For all practical purposes, the war was the most important event in the South; however, in Branson this was not the case. The narrator notes that the war barely disturbed Branson, and, in this fact, it is different from other southern communities because it survived the war without damage (Walcott 83). However, although no war-damage occurs in Branson, damage does occur—in people's hearts and minds. Racism damages Branson. In this respect, Branson, like other post-Civil War towns in the South, remains stagnant. Chesnutt writes in the introduction:

To Branson County, as to most rural communities in the south, the war is the one historical event that overshadows all others. It is the era from which all local

chronicles are dated—births, deaths, marriages, storms, freshets. No description of the life of any southern community would be perfect that failed to emphasize the all pervading influence of the great conflict. (“The Sheriff’s Children” 25)

Chesnutt’s Branson County illustrates the outcome of the first Reconstruction in the United States. There are two branches to the history of the first Reconstruction era: “The first covers the complete history of the entire country from 1865 to 1877 following the Civil War; the second focuses on the transformation of the Southern United States from 1863 to 1877, as directed by Congress, with the reconstruction of state and society” (“Reconstruction Era”). The Reconstruction has two parts: the first Reconstruction is the “tragic era” following the Civil War (Carleton 171). The second Reconstruction occurs in 1944 where “Conditions in this second or new Reconstruction-which has been in process since 1944, beginning with the outlawing of the White primaries-are far different from what they were in the first Reconstruction” (171). President Andrew Johnson had a plan after the Civil War for Reconstruction. In Johnson’s plan, according to Carleton’s assessment, the southern states had never given up their right to govern themselves, and the federal government had no right to determine voting requirements or other questions at the state level” (“Reconstruction”). The Republican-controlled Congress rejected President Johnson’s plan. The federal government gave advantages to the freemen of the southern states; “After rejecting the Reconstruction plan of President Andrew Johnson, the Republican Congress enacted laws and Constitutional amendments that empowered the federal government to enforce the principle of equal rights, and gave Black Southerners the right to vote and hold office” (“America’s Reconstruction”). Black people achieved their freedom after the Civil War. Also, the Reconstruction provided

Black people their rights in the economy, education, and politics. According to Edward L. Ayers, “The village and town population of the South grew by five million people between 1880 and 1910” (55). The population growth in the South during the Reconstruction era was due to Northerners migrating south. Some people came to the southern states, for example, to help farmers rebuild.

In turn, other people came to these consolidation points to sell goods to the farmers, loan them money, educate some of their children, fix their implements or build them new buildings, furnish them occasional legal and illegal entertainment, maintain the county’s courts and offices, and provide the services of lawyers and doctors and undertakers (56). The Reconstruction opened new doors in black southerners’ lives. Chesnutt’s *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* was published after this period of Reconstruction “when Blacks were prohibited from integrating into the White culture. In fact, laws were enforced to keep the two races separate and to ensure White supremacy” (Harris 4). Chesnutt writes his short stories to express “his concerns of African Americans losing their cultural identity, pride in their Black heritage, and their moral consciousness” (4). For this reason, Chesnutt addresses his short stories to his white audience. Chesnutt’s “The Sheriff’s Children” is an example of the hypocrisy of white people toward black people. The townsmen demand the lynching of the mulatto boy, Tom, and prepare to take matters in their own hands. The sheriff says to his daughter, “There’s a mob comin’ this way to lynch the nigger we’ve got locked up” (“The Sheriff’s Children” 29). This example shows the widespread White supremacy of the post-Reconstruction South.

The story is set in Branson County, North Carolina, ten years after the Civil War. No Civil War battles occurred in Branson, but individuals still feel the effects of racial prejudice. In this status, Branson, as other Post-Civil War towns, stays stagnant. Racism is the obvious theme in "The Sheriff's Children." According to William M. Ramsey, "'The Sheriff's Children' [is Chesnutt's] most mordant story of mixed race" (33). This criticism of racism is highlighted in the story through the ultimate death of an arguably innocent mulatto character. The hardest position of any African American in this story is materialized in the character of Tom, a young biracial male character who is accused of a murder which he denies committing. Tom becomes a suspect after one of Troy's townsmen, Captain Walker, is found dead in his house. Tom murmurs hoarsely, "Don't let 'em lynch me; I didn't kill the old man" ("The Sheriff's Children" 31). Tom furiously tries to make the sheriff understand his situation. The sheriff does not believe Tom, but he understands that his duty as sheriff is to protect him. Tom pleads with the sheriff, "For God's Sake, Sheriff" (31). Tom is identified as the murderer only because a community member claims "that a strange mulatto had been seen going in the direction of Captain Walker's house the night before" the murder, "and had been met going away from Troy early Friday morning, by a farmer on his way to town" (26). Although the narrator claims that other circumstances seemed to connect the stranger with the crime, those circumstances are not related to the reader. Nonetheless, based on these sightings, the town's Sheriff Campbell gathers a posse, catches the suspect mulatto youth, and jails him.

Racism in this story is obvious in the boy, Tom's, accusation of murder. According to Lena Whitt, "Captain Walker, a hero of Gettysburg, has been murdered,

and a young mulatto suspected of the crime is caught by a posse and placed in the county jail” (53). Once the boy is jailed, the townspeople remain dissatisfied. One of the community men says to the sheriff, “Ef you Fellers air gwine ter set down an’ let a wuthless nigger kill the bes’ White man in Branson, an’ not say nuthin’ ner do nuthin’, *I* ‘*II* move outen the caounty” (27). This man describes Tom as a worthless “nigger” and attributes Captain Walker as the best white man. According to the man, Tom is the lowest status, and Captain Walker is the highest. Also, this man threatens to move from the county if the sheriff does nothing to punish Tom who is terrified by the determination of the lynch mob and who fears for his life. In the jail cell, Tom is

crouched in a corner, his yellow face, blanched with terror, looking ghastly in the semi-darkness of the room. A cold perspiration had gathered on his forehead, and his teeth were chattering with affright. ‘For God’s sake, Sheriff,’ he murmured hoarsely, ‘Don’t let ‘em lynch me; I didn’t kill the old man.’ (31)

The townsmen immediately determine that Tom should die. One townsman suggests, “‘Hangin’ air too good fer the murderer,’ said one; ‘he oughter be burnt, stidier bein’ hung’” (27). This sentiment leads the men to agree to lynch the boy. The lynch committee is formed to manage the affair. Some of the men go to their dinners while others secure recruits for the lynching party agreeing to meet at five o’clock at a local store from which they will proceed to the jail. According to June Socken, “Many of Chesnutt’s stories became real tragedies when the reader realized that, as difficult as the position of mulattoes was, the status of their Black brothers, whose skin color doomed them forever to oblivion, was even greater” (53). Fortunately, for Tom, a concerned black

citizen, Brer Sam, hears of the mob's plan, and recognizing the sheriff is a fair-minded man, goes to Campbell's back door, a requirement for black people at that the time, to inform him of the plan. Sam is fully aware of the sheriff's opinion of lynching, for he overhears Campbell tell the gathering of men that he would never allow a prisoner to be taken from his jail other than over his dead body.

The sheriff is, indeed, a dutiful officer of the law. As such, the sheriff loads his guns and heads to the jail to ensure the security of the jailed youth against the mob. He handles the mob with humor, telling them that he is surprised they want to come into the jail since most people want to keep out of jail. The group is not appreciative of their sheriff's wit. Even when the mob suggests that they will break in to the jail, the sheriff does not flinch. He responds, "The first man that tries it will be filled with buckshot. I'm the sheriff of this county; I know my duty, and I mean to do it" ("The Sheriff's Children" 30). In this case, the sheriff starts offering justice to the prisoner before he knows the prisoner is his own son. However, "An attempted lynching is prevented by one man, Sheriff Campbell; yet the prisoner dies in his cell that night" (Whitt 53).

The reader is informed of Tom being Sheriff Campbell's son through a conversation in the jail cell. Tom is taken to jail where he pleads with the sheriff to keep him safe: "I didn't kill the old man" (33). Assuming Tom is telling the truth, the sheriff's duty is doubly important. He must save a possibly innocent man from the lynch mob, and it is the duty of the sheriff to protect any accused person of a crime to ensure the accused is given a fair trial. According to P. Jay Delmar, "Campbell is a man who wears the mask of duty and morality" (367). Sheriff Campbell, as a well-respected leader of the community, is able to perform his duty towards the prisoner. Once the sheriff points the

gun at the mob and the townsmen understand that he will shoot them if they get a step closer to the jail, they retreat. The leader of the mob states, “The sheriff says he’ll shoot, and he’s got the drop on us this time. There are not any of us that want to follow Cap’n Walker jest yet. Besides, the sheriff is a good fellow, and we don’t want to hurt ‘im.” (32). Tom, whom the sheriff believed a coward after he begged him to protect him, turns out to be assertive. He takes advantage of the sheriff after he removes Tom’s hand and leg cuffs, and grabs the sheriff’s gun.

At this point, the sheriff understands that Tom is not a coward and that Tom intends to shoot him. The sheriff pleads, “you would not kill the man to whom you owe your own life” (34). Tom’s response is telling. He says, “You speak more truly than you know. I indeed owe my life to you” (34). This revelation is a turning point in the story: “Tom reveals angrily, I am Cicely’s son, ... Cicely whom you sold, with her child, to the speculator on his way to Alabama” (34). Sheriff Campbell finally grasps the enormity of his situation. According to Socken, “Chesnutt also showed the tragic effects of color prejudice from another point of view; he portrayed mulatto children, the products of a White man’s passion for a Black woman, who suffered and were deprived of a meaningful existence because of the abandonment of their White fathers” (54). Campbell exclaims, “Good God you would not murder your own father” (“The Sheriff’s Children” 34). Tom replies wrathfully, “What father’s duty have you performed for me?” (34). Tom understands what a father’s duties are toward a son, such as protecting, loving, and giving a name, but Sheriff Campbell does not give Tom these rights, so Tom does not have any good reasons to see him as a father. Tom is full of anger toward his father and does not respect him as such:



It was well enough for me to claim the relationship, but it comes with poor grace from you to ask anything by reason of it. What father's duty have you ever performed for me? Did you give me your name, or even your protection? Other White men gave their colored sons freedom and money, and sent them to the free States. (34)

Because Tom threatens his father with the sheriff's gun, Sheriff Campbell is in a fragile position. However, Tom needs Sheriff Campbell to protect him from the lynch mob and help him to escape. Tom does not believe in the sheriff because the sheriff did not protect his mother and him while he is a child, yet in order to be safe, he needs a father's protection. However, Tom's thoughts motivate him to raise his arm to shoot the sheriff his own father (Ramsey 1).

"The Sheriff's Children" results in moral confusion because the guilt and innocence of the characters are ambiguous terms. Although Chesnutt does not include Tom's mother in the story, offering instead just her name "Cicely," she is one of the innocent people whom Chesnutt wants the reader to remember. The reader is not aware of her feelings for her master although she is the mother of his child, Tom. Sheriff Campbell sells both Tom and his mother for two flawed reasons; first, he is angry when he sells his slave mistress and his own son; and second, he needs cash. The narrative reveals that, "because of a quarrel with Cicely and the pressure for money, Campbell sold her and her young son, Tom, to a speculator on his way to Alabama many years ago" (Whitt 53). Despite the sheriff's affection for Cicely, he thinks of her only as a slave. Tom, Cicely's child, says that he has no real freedom. He says to his father, "You gave

me a White man's spirit, and you made me a slave, and crushed it out" ("The Sheriff's Children" 34).

Tom suffers from multiple conflicts in this story: he inherits only one thing from his mother: enslavement. Following the condition of his mother, Tom is a slave. According to Lena M. Whitt, the story "[g]ives insight in to the psychological crippling which the mulatto, Tom, suffers and the insensitivity of the aristocratic White man who fathered him" (52). Tom recalls his time in school:

I learned to feel that no degree of learning or wisdom will change the color of my skin and that I shall always wear what in my own country is a badge of degradation. When I think about it seriously I do not care particularly for such a life. It is the animal in me, not the man that flees the gallows.

("The Sheriff's Children" 35)

Tom has become educated and shows himself to be a very intelligent young man; however, as he tells the sheriff in the story that he has been to school, it failed to "work some marvelous change in [his] condition" (35). Whitt attributes this understanding to Chesnutt's personal background, stating, "Chesnutt's mulatto characters are most vivid and powerful, probably because he personally was caught in the identity crisis created by his being part of both races" (52). Tom faces his racial conflict with his mother far away from his father. Polly, on the other hand, has never faced any conflict related to her father.

In fact, Polly functions as the sheriff's savior in the story. When she goes to the prison, Polly sees the child with a firearm pointed at her father. She has her father's horse-pistol, and she shoots her own sibling unwittingly. The readers are provided insight

as the scene unfolds, “As the prisoner lifts the gun to shoot his father, the sheriff’s legitimate daughter shoots her mulatto half-brother in the arm” (53). Polly listens to the discussion between the detainee and her own father. Tom demands his father release him and allow him to escape. Tom quickly realizes that he believes that his father will sound the alarm and that death of the sheriff is the only way out. Tom declares, “It is your life for mine; there is but one safe way for me; you die” (“The Sheriff’s Children” 35). It is at this moment that Polly decides her father needs help; she believes that Tom will kill her father, so she acts, “He raised his arm to fire, when there was a flash—a report from the passage behind him. His arm fell heavily at his side, and the pistol dropped at his feet” (35). She does not kill Tom; she merely wounds him.

Tom’s position is powerless now; “The sheriff opens the door and secured the fallen weapon. Then, seizing the prisoner he thrust him into the cell and locked the door upon him; after which he turned to Polly, who leaned half-fainting against the wall, her hands clasped over heart” (35). She affirms to her father: “Oh, father, I was just in time! She cried hysterically, and, wildly sobbing, threw herself into her father’s arms” (35). Polly’s original intention is to protect her father from the mob. Instead, she shoots and wounds her own half-brother, a justifiable response; still, she nearly commits the sin of fratricide.

Chesnutt complicates the themes of guilt and innocence in the story. Sheriff Campbell is Tom’s father although he has never held any accountability for Tom. In fact, “The sheriff had sold the mother and her infant son into slavery many years before and had never assumed any responsibility for the rearing of his child” (Soken 54). In Tom’s view, the Sheriff has full responsibility for his life because he sold him and his mother to

the rice swamps, as Tom describes Alabama: “*You sold me to the rice swamps*” (“The Sheriff’s Children” 34). Tom feels disgusted when the sheriff says to him, “You would not murder your own father” (34). The Sheriff tries to calm Tom down by reminding him that he is alive and free. Tom responds with description of his suffering when his father gave him a life through a black mother, “She died under the lash, because she had enough womanhood to call her soul her own” (34). Tom ensures that his father knows that he is to blame for what has happened to him and his mother. Tom’s view is that his father is guilty. Just before Polly enters the cell to shoot him, the sheriff begins to understand his responsibility.

It may seem strange that a man who could sell his own child into slavery should hesitate at such a moment, when his life was trembling in the balance. But the baleful influence of human slavery poisoned the very fountains of life, and created new standards of right. The sheriff was conscientious; his environment had merely warped his conscience. (35)

Chesnutt gives the reader his ideas about the damaging effects of slavery and racism. He also shows the character of the sheriff facing these realities.

Sheriff Campbell is depicted as a slave owner who sells his own son but who begins to realize his responsibility. “The Sheriff’s Children” also complicates the question of Tom’s guilt or innocence. He is a criminal only because he steals Captain Walker’s coat. However, he does not kill Captain Walker. Townsmen determine that Tom is guilty because someone sees him near Captain Walker’s home; they do not give Tom an opportunity to deny the accusation. Tom explains, “I was at his house at nine o’clock. I stole from it the coat that was on my back when I was taken” (33). Tom

declares that he is innocent of the murder while he is in the jail with Sheriff Campbell, proclaiming, “I didn’t kill the old man” (33). Campbell does not believe Tom, but he does protect him from the lynching. Sheriff Campbell sharply says, “You will probably be hung sooner or later, but it shall not be to-day, if I can help it” (31). Sheriff Campbell helps Tom prepare in case the mob comes back. He unlocks his fetters and handcuffs and tells Tom that if he “can’t hold the jail, you’ll have to make the best fight you can. If I’m shot, I’ll consider my responsibility at an end” (31). In a sense, the sheriff frees Tom from a slavery-like condition when he removes Tom’s chains. However, Sheriff Campbell never accepts Tom’s innocence until it is too late. He is most concerned with protecting his authority. Tom decides to finish his own life.

[Tom] had no faith in the civil justice likely to be given a Negro suspected of killing the town's hero. Rather than taking a chance on being lynched by a mob or killed by the law of the land, he makes the decision to end his own life and determine his own fate. (Whitt 53)

Sheriff Campbell does not let Tom escape from the jail. The sheriff is convinced that Tom is guilty because he offers Tom no chance to explain his innocence.

In this position, Tom cannot leave the jail without fearing that they will kill him anyway. The townsmen and Sheriff Campbell believe “a White man had been killed by a [black man]” (“The Sheriff’s Children” 27). However, Tom wants more from the sheriff than just the admission of his innocence. He also wants the sheriff to admit his guilt in abandoning him as a child. When Tom decides to commit suicide, he wants to make his father feel guilty. The sheriff’s consideration for his son comes too late. After the

sheriff's daughter shoots her half-brother, her father leaves Tom alone because he wants to think deeply about his son's situation. According to Whitt,

For the first time he sees, regardless of custom and law, that he as a parent owes some duty to his son. When the sheriff goes to the jail the next morning, however, he finds it is too late to help his son. Tom has committed suicide by removing the bandages from his arm and allowing himself to bleed to death. (53)

Whitt further states, "That night the sheriff goes through a great psychological search that tears away at the web of tradition. He struggles with unaccustomed thoughts and must deal with certain acts of his life in a truthful manner" (53). Tom's death exposes the sheriff's guilt and his failure to fulfill his duty to his son. "The Sheriff's Children" is a story about the effects of racism on familial bonds. Branson County is a place with more white people than black people. White people have a prominent position in the town. Most of them own the farms they till; and even before the war, there were no very wealthy families to force their neighbors, by comparison, into the category of poor whites. The sheriff enjoys his position of power in the town, and for most of the story, he feels no obligation to acknowledge his mixed-race child.

Branson County's black residents endure prejudice before the Civil War; "The Sheriff's Children" is a story composed ten years following the Civil War, during which the townspeople have remained the same. Their attitudes towards black people have not changed. When Tom comes to town, the townspeople perceive him as "a strange mulatto [who] had been seen going in the direction of Captain Walker's house the night before, and had been met going away from Troy early Friday morning" ("The Sheriff's

Children” 26). Locals determine that there is a connection between this unusual mulatto and the murder of Captain Walker. The town’s response to Tom, a mulatto young man, symbolizes prejudice. Their prejudice guarantees that the residents will not see beyond his blackness; and therefore, the townsmen decide to lynch the mulatto boy to honor the dead man.

The townspeople decide to avenge the murder and to ‘honor’ the memory of the dead man, a veteran of the Mexican-American War, by lynching the mulatto who has been placed in the jail of Sheriff Campbell. Branson's past and present are thus rendered in a moment of passion: the unremitting blood-lust of the ‘social corpse’ that honors its dead with blood sacrifices, which, in the South, are the lives of Black men. (Walcott 83)

Chesnutt suggests that Troy is a town that needs the black man’s blood to feel honor toward white people who died because of racial conflicts; there is no other solution.

Just as the townspeople attempt to lynch Tom to exact symbolic revenge for their losses, Tom attempts his own revenge when he picks up the sheriff’s weapon. He can shoot Sheriff Campbell promptly, yet he threatens the sheriff to achieve his agenda. Tom's motivation is to force Sheriff Campbell to concede that he is Tom’s father. Additionally, Tom needs Sheriff Campbell’s help to escape from lynching. After Tom takes the Sheriff's firearm, he demands that the sheriff remain still. Tom needs to endanger Sheriff Campbell to give himself a chance to get away. This is made clear when Sheriff Campbell asks what Tom intends to do. Tom answers that he wants to escape. Tom’s moral position is ambiguous; he wants to “avenge upon you my mother’s wrong and my own. But still I hate to shoot you; I have never yet taken human life” (“The

Sheriff's Children" 35). Here, the reader sees that Tom does not desire to shoot Sheriff Campbell, yet he does want revenge. Tom wants to make his father feel guilt, and he wants the sheriff to let him go and give him a guarantee that the townspeople will not catch him. He asks, "Will you promise to give no alarm and make no attempt to capture me until morning, if I do not shoot?" (35). In the next moment, Tom has a realization. He cannot trust Sheriff Campbell and he should instead end Sheriff Campbell's life. Tom says, "Stop, You need not promise. I could not trust you if you did. It is your life for mine; there is but one safe way for me; you must die" (35). Tom chooses to slaughter Sheriff Campbell, his own father, to be safe when he escapes from jail. Tom raises his arm to shoot while Polly shoots his arm. In this manner, Tom chooses to shoot his father to spare his own life.

In this scene, Polly feels that something terrible will happen to her father because her father explains to her. "There's a mob comin' this way to lynch the nigger we've got locked up. But they won't do it" (29). Polly asks her father to stay, and she says, "They'll shoot you if you don't give him up" (29). Thus, Polly is not afraid of the prisoner; she is afraid of the lynch mob. By the time Polly arrives at the jail, her father is in trouble. Listening to the conversation between Tom and Sheriff Campbell, she concludes that the prisoner will shoot her father. Subsequently, Polly enters the jail and shoots Tom. This shooting forces Tom to drop the gun at his feet. Polly shoots Tom to save her father: "Raising the gun, [Tom] in turn is shot in the arm by the sheriff's daughter Polly" (Ramsey 34). Ramsey claims,

Tom's hybrid heritage has mutated and rendered arbitrarily superficial the



binary terms White and Black. The mulatto problematizes the construct of Whiteness, now no longer opposable to Blackness. Most importantly it is the sheriff's revolver, symbol of society's will to enforce fair justice, that accomplishes this turnaround. (34)

By forcing Tom to drop the revolver at his feet, Polly ensures Tom's attempt at racial justice fails.

She shoots him to spare her father's life. Since the shot does not execute Tom, nobody can consider her a murderer. What's important here is "Two elements of the work are crucial here—the sheriff's daughter's wounding of the prisoner and his subsequent suicide—and both are well disguised" (Delmar 368). Polly goes to the correctional facility alone and waits until the mob disperses before entering the jail:

I watched until they all went away, she said. I heard the shot from the woods and I saw you shoot. Then when you did not come out I feared something had happened, that perhaps you had been wounded. I got out the other pistol and ran over here. When I found the door open, I knew something was wrong, and when I heard voices I crept upstairs, and reached the top just in time to hear him say he would kill you. Oh, it was a narrow escape! ("The Sheriff's Children" 36)

Gerald W. Haslam writes that, "The reader never learns what the sheriff's decision will be for the prisoner decides to kill him, only to be shot from behind by his half-sister" (23).

Sheriff Campbell is Tom's and Polly's father. He sold Tom and his mother to the South, but he raised Polly lovingly. Tom accuses his father of abandoning him and demands Sheriff Campbell atone for this by letting him get away. After Polly shoots Tom

in his arm, Sheriff Campbell says that Tom will be in the prison until the morning when he will bring a specialist to treat him. Sheriff Campbell spends his night pondering Tom's position. "The Sheriff was in an unusually thoughtful mood that evening. He puts salt in his coffee at supper, and poured vinegar over his pancakes. To many of Polly's questions he returned random answers. When he had gone to bed he lay awake for several hours" ("The Sheriff's Children" 36).

Realizing his failure as a father, Sheriff Campbell makes a moral choice toward Tom; he will give him a chance to escape since he sees that he has some obligation toward his child. The sheriff understands his duty to his child, and he feels an inborn obligation that customs of racial prejudice cannot destroy. Sheriff Campbell, lying awake in the night, felt a paternal bond. As Delmar explains:

In all justice and mercy, as Chesnutt suggests, Campbell should let his son go. Even if he were guilty of murder, his chance of escaping the lynch mob are minimal at best; should he somehow escape its rage, his chances of receiving a fair trial in Troy are even worse... Even though a tragic atmosphere has already been established, a happy conclusion is not completely unlikely because of the inherent nobility of the characters. (369-370)

After the shooting, Sheriff Campbell leaves Tom with a bandaged arm, and in the middle of the night, he dies. Tom removes his bandage from his arm to allow himself to bleed to death. Tom feels abused because his father does not help him when his half-sister shoots him. Delmar suggests that the sheriff's gestures, the bandage on Tom's arm and the promise of a doctor in the next day, "Are acts of kindness which apparently bode

well for the Sheriff and his son” (370). However, Tom is unable to see the shift in his father’s feelings. According to Ramsey, “Tom removes the bandage from his wound and deliberately bleeds to death, the victim of his despair, his father’s youthful immorality and neglect, and his half-sister’s fratricidal shot” (34).

Tom, both motherless and fatherless, is a child who grows up in this difficult situation. He is a symbol of the outcome of abandonment as he is parentless and without a mentor. According to Susan Wright:

In the story, Tom is another dispossessed slave child who journeys precariously toward adulthood. But he does so without the necessary relationships that would enable him to achieve self-integration: he is motherless, fatherless, and, as far as the reader knows, without any mentor. These absences are ominous for the archetypal child, but they are the death knell for this former slave child. (17)

Tom does not have any advantages which a mentor might give to him. Wright says that Mother means love, care and motherly kindness; father means protection, financial support and a name. That said, Tom has no reason not to threaten his father when he gains control of the sheriff’s gun. The sheriff and Tom have a conversation about these duties:

After the mob is dispersed by the sheriff, Tom gains control of a handgun and threatens the sheriff. This shift in control leads to a discussion about the concept of duty, during which the child becomes the father of the man in terms of his comprehension of the obligation and role of a

parent/mentor and the reality of the sheriff's complete neglect of both roles in relation to Tom. (18)

Chesnutt portrays Tom's death differently than other child-deaths in nineteenth century fiction.

Although the death of the child protagonist is a common occurrence in nineteenth-century literature, the difference between Tom's death and the death of other child literary heroes is that he is a twice-abandoned child. One could argue that his father abandons him a second time the night of Tom's death, leaving the boy wounded in jail, knowing that he is innocent, knowing that a lynch mob is thirsting for his blood, and, most important, knowing that Tom is his biological son. (18)

Throughout "The Sheriff's Children," Chesnutt depicts his characters making various choices: Tom attempts to shoot his father to escape from a false accusation and to avenge his mother. Polly shoots her half-brother to spare her father without knowing Tom is her relative. Sheriff Campbell leaves his child in the correctional facility but later decides he will free him. During the night, however, Tom removes the gauze from his arm to bleed to death to let his father feel remorseful for his entire life. The three characters' choices suit each of their positions in their view. Polly is the daughter of the threatened sheriff; Tom is an abandoned son, and the sheriff is the county's authority figure and the story's father figure. Even though Chesnutt shows the sheriff realizing his fatherly obligation to Tom, "Tom kills himself in a rejection not of his Blackness but of his sinful father" (Ramsey 34). Having sold his son to slave holders when he was just a baby, Sheriff Campbell's realization of his duty to Tom comes too late.

## CHAPTER IV

### ETHICAL DECISIONS IN CHESNUTT'S "HER VIRGINIA MAMMY"

"Her Virginia Mammy" is a short story of gathering and reuniting. In Chesnutt's short story of a mother and girl finding each other following twenty-three years separation, the mother remembers her little girl; but the little girl does not know her mother. According to Jennifer Riddle Harding, "In Charles Chesnutt's tale of a mother and daughter finding each other after twenty-three years apart, it is clear that the mother recognizes her daughter, but unclear whether the daughter recognizes her mother" (309). The color line separates them; the girl considers herself white while the mother has a place with the class of biracial characters that Chesnutt alludes to in this story as somewhat less than white. According to Ramsey, "His racial credo is most explicitly demonstrated in the story 'Her Virginia Mammy,' in which the mixed-race, lightly completed orphan Clara Hohlfelder is adopted by Whites and raised believing she is White" (34). Harding explains, "Biracial characters, and the complications and perplexities of their lives in the North and South after the Civil War, are the focus of this and most other stories in Chesnutt's 1899 collection *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line*" (309). In "Her Virginia Mammy," the mother relates this story of her past, and she appears to be determined to hide this from her little girl by masking their genuine relationship.

The little girl never remembers her mother and in the wake of listening to her mother's tricky story acknowledges her as a dear Virginia mammy: "Listen, child, . . . It is all very strange and wonderful, for that slip and necklace, and, now that I have seen them, . . . I was on the pride of St. Louis, and I knew your father—and your mother" ("Her Virginia Mammy" 21). The mother never tells the truth to her little girl: "The reader but not Clara perceives the truth: Mrs. Harper was the actual mother, probably was not married to Stafford, but may well have had the blood of Fairfaxes in her veins" (Ramsey 35). Her mother wholeheartedly formulates the story for her girl while the girl maintains her attachment to the white family. The mother is consigned to a lesser part that enables her daughter's continued assimilation into the white race. Chesnutt gives readers a chance to discover Clara's identity. The reader understands that Clara is biracial, but Clara does not. Clara uses the story to assure her whiteness. Her mother formulates the creative story of white guardians and a stranded white infant, and Clara listens enthusiastically. Clara unwittingly asks her mother, "Tell me, oh, tell me all! . . . Who were my father and my mother, and who am I?" (21). For Clara, "the woman's words fell upon her ear like water on a thirsty soil" (21).

In this short story, a white man looks with loving eyes at a beautiful lady who does not have any knowledge of her family. She has been pulled from a waterway and raised by White guardians, but this specific status does not make the white man uncomfortable about his lover's heritage. Indeed, nothing ever diminishes his affection for the lady. However, Clara worries that her genuine parentage did not originate from white stock; thus she declines to marry. She meets a black woman who educates her about everything concerning her superb guardians and her rescue from the exploded boat.

What's fairly tragic about this story is the willful ignorance that each of the three characters permit in place of the truth. The mother makes her daughter feel at ease with an illusion of her past:

Listen, child ... It is all very strange and wonderful, for that slip and necklace, and, now that I have seen them, your face and your voice and your ways, all tell me who you are. Your eyes are your father's eyes, your voice is your father's voice. The slip was worked by your mother's hand.

(21)

According to Karen M. Chandler, "The story's rich irony, its ambiguous evaluation of female heroism, depends on the work of old and new melodramatic formulas that encourage conflicting responses to action and character" (9). Clara discovers that she is an adopted child after her real parents died. Her real parents are ambiguous for her. Mrs. Harper gives Clara an ironic gift, a mythical past paving the way for a future with John.

"Her Virginia Mammy" depicts the joy of a mother reuniting with her little girl. The story gives a humorous discourse on the lawful dispossession of biracial Americans by individual guardians and the way of life everywhere in the nineteenth century. As a remark on social conditions that split families by race, "Her Virginia Mammy" underscores the outcomes of a familial color line. For example, general social amputation of connections and the passionate and material cost of exclusion for biracial children are illuminated in the story. The story is likewise subtle in demonstrating that marriage, the lawful way of authenticity for children, could be inaccessible for biracial ladies. The story's doubly coded structure, in which the veiled story of a multiracial family stays covered up underneath a surface story of White benefit, parallels nineteenth century

social conditions that kept the presence of multiracial hereditary families authoritatively out of view in spite of the undeniable presence of biracial Americans. Ramsey argues that, “With some contrivance, Chesnutt finesses the issues of presence and erasure. Presence is accomplished by the addition of Clara’s Black blood to a highly cultured White caste, in effect endorsing her full and rightful American paternity” (35). “Her Virginia Mammy” is an example of Chesnutt’s ability to create mysteries for attentive readers to solve. He sometimes utilizes metaphorical diction including representations and plays on words that regularly withhold as much as they uncover. When Chesnutt describes the mother’s experience of holding her daughter’s slip, her hands “could not disguise their trembling” (“Her Virginia Mammy” 21). Several moments later, she says, “The slip was worked by your mother’s hand” (21). The trembling hands are the same hands that stitched the garment. However, due to the prejudice of society, the mother cannot reveal her identity.

Chesnutt presents instances of racial prejudice though in Clara’s passing in white society. According to Chandler, “Closely examining Chesnutt’s ‘Her Virginia Mammy’ (1899), a short story about a biracial woman’s passing into White society, sheds light both on melodrama’s complicated narrative mechanisms and on its complex address to readers” (6). Although melodrama uses simple techniques such as straightforward structure to provoke easy emotions, it can reveal intricate social situations. Using this narrative technique, Chesnutt presents Clara as a girl who does not know her mixed race. Clara has to reject her lover’s request to marry her because she has an important need in her life, which is knowing her parents. She says to him, “You know I love you, John, and why I do not say what you wish. You must give me a little more time to make up my



mind before I can consent to burden you with a nameless wife, one who does not know who her mother was” (“Her Virginia Mammy” 12). Clara knows that she is a desirable young woman, but she feels the need to be clear with her future husband; she will accept his proposal to marry him only after she knows her parents. Chesnutt places readers in this melodramatic situation to gain reader’s sympathy toward a biracial girl. However, Chesnutt sets the story in 1899, which is after Reconstruction, and therefore, after the Jim Crow laws were passed. Chesnutt aims his story at white readers. Chandler states that in particular, “Her Virginia Mammy” advances two conflicting moral perspectives: one overtly challenging White readers’ assumptions about racial purity, the other more subtly upholding the importance of African Americans’ racial pride, solidarity, and historical awareness” (7).

Clara tries to make her lover understand her when she tells him that she must know her history. Clara wants to be clear when she marries John. She does not feel contentment because her parentage is ambiguous. For her, “It is a dreadful thing to have no name” (“Her Virginia Mammy” 12). According to Ramsey, “Courtied by Mr. Winthrop, an east coast physician and descendent of Mayflower pilgrims, Clara resists marriage for fear that her unknown ancestry cannot suitably match his Brahmin background” (34). Although John tries to give her a satisfactory position, Clara needs a family connection. John is a good person who can give contentment for his love even though he does not know her heritage. He says to her, “You are known by a worthy [name], which was freely given you, and is legally yours” (“Her Virginia Mammy” 12). While Clara loves John, she does not want to let John into the dreadful situation of the unknown about her parentage. John wants Clara to understand that he is in love with her,

and she is the greatest inspiration in his life: “Now the one inspiration of my life is the hope to make you mine” (13).

John answers Clara because she understands all the dreams he seeks to realize. Clara does not want to be selfish and make John dispense of his dreams, but she wants to be sure that he chooses the right woman. “Her Virginia Mammy” is arguably Chesnutt’s best short story because he uses dramatic irony to provoke a reaction in the reader. Chesnutt reveals a gentle, quiet, black woman, Mrs. Harper, who sits with Clara to answer Clara’s question about her parentage. Clara is a character of uncertain parentage, and Mrs. Harper offers a clarifying answer. Clara’s nervousness derives from not knowing whether she is simply white, because she deserves to marry a white man who adores her. According to Harding, “John claims not to care about her lack of family affiliation, but Clara cares so much that she feels she cannot answer John’s proposal” (312). She urgently needs parentage information to eliminate her torment. Mrs. Harper recounts a phenomenal story that clarifies how white guardians whom she knew adopted them. Mrs. Harper tells Clara that her blood is blue, which means a beautiful, White aristocratic family on her mother’s side, and likewise her father belongs “to one of the first families, the Staffords, of Melton County” (“Her Virginia Mammy” 21). Consequently, Clara feels Mrs. Harper has verified her past and given her a pedigree. Clara knows her ancestry: “It is too good for me to believe. I am of good blood, of an old and aristocratic family. My presentiment has come true. I can marry my lover, and I shall owe all my happiness to you” (23).

In “Her Virginia Mammy,” Chesnutt cleverly uncovers not just the troubles confronted by racially mixed people but also the extraordinary biases against all African

Americans. When Clara feels concerns about her parentage, she does not think that anyone can solve her problem. Mrs. Harper being there in the studio is like God's gift to Clara; she discovers her parents' history from a person who always sees her, but whom she never imagined could help her. Mrs. Harper shares a false narrative and identifies herself as the family mammy, not as Clara's birth mother:

He [her father] went with your mother and you—you were then just a year old—to Cincinnati, to settle up some business connected with his estate. When he had completed his business, he embarked on the *Pride of St. Louis* [the boat] with you and your mother and a colored nurse. 'And how did you know about them?' asked Clara. 'I was one of the party. I was'—  
'You were the colored nurse?—my mammy. (22)

Because she knows that Clara wants to be white, not biracial, for her chosen life, Mrs. Harper does not assert the truth:

Through a plot twist it is revealed to Clara by Mrs. Harper, a local mulatto seamstress originally from Virginia, that Clara's parents were killed in a steamboat accident and that Mrs. Harper was the family mammy. Mrs. Harper assures Clara that her father was a Virginia gentleman named Stafford and that her mother had within her the blood of a first family of Virginia, the Fairfaxes. (Ramsey 35)

Chesnutt reveals the prejudice against biracial people; Mrs. Harper sacrifices her opportunity to know her daughter because she knows that exposing her true racial identity will threaten Clara's happiness.

Although Clara has been raised as a white woman, she is not racist. She teaches a dance class for African American students. She realizes that some of the best dance schools refused students of color. These schools, “tabooed all pupils, singly or in classes, who labored under social disabilities—and this included the people of at least one other race who were vastly farther along in the world than the colored people of the community where Miss Hohlfelder lived” (“Her Virginia Mammy” 15). Clara does not have this bias. Although she teaches them for money, she does not scorn her students. She pays attention to their color, preferring lighter-skinned people, but she is most strongly focused in the story on finding her birth parents. “Her Virginia Mammy” ironically is set in Clara’s dance studio where African American students dance in the background while she solves the mystery of her parentage.

John is Clara’s sweetheart. He tries to stop Clara from thinking about the mystery of her parentage. Because Clara does not have anyone close to her but John, she shares her emotions with him. Because John says to Clara that her adoptive parents are the most important to him because they bring Clara to him, she speaks dreamily:

I feel sure that I am of good family, and the blood of my ancestors seems to call me in clear and certain tones. Then again when my mood changes, I am all at sea—I feel that even if I had but simply to turn my hand to learn who I am and whence I came, I should shrink from taking the step, for fear that what I might learn would leave me forever unhappy. (13)

John speaks with more sympathy:

‘Dearest’ he said, taking her in his arms, while from the hall and down the corridor came the softened strain of music, ‘Put aside these unwholesome

fancies. Your past is shrouded in mystery. Take my name, as you have taken my love, and I'll make your future so happy that you won't have time to think of the past.' (14)

John is ready to give Clara his name, happiness, and love; that is all he needs for her to be his wife. Clara loves John, but her personal mystery makes her scared to marry him: "We learn that this man, John, has asked Clara to marry him and she has refused to give him an answer. Clara's mysterious past has given her misgivings about marriage even though she loves John" (Harding 312). Clara fears that if the history of her parents contrasts with her present affection and satisfaction, she would be an unsuitable wife. Therefore, John adds, "What are a lot of musty, mouldy old grandfathers, compared with life and love and happiness?" ("Her Virginia Mammy" 14). For this reason, Harding comments, "John assures her that he cares nothing for her past. Clara fears, though, that his love might not withstand a dramatic revelation" (312). Clara is afraid John may discover that her "origin was the worst it could be" ("Her Virginia Mammy" 14). However, John asserts that he would marry her, "just the same—even if [she] were one of [her] dancing-class tonight" (15). If she was African American, he would still marry her. John provides Clara with an ideal situation for her life. He offers love and happiness, and he does not care about her ancestry.

However, Clara believes that John is unrealistic with his outlook. She worries about society's expectations for their marriage. She says to him, "It's all very well of you to talk that way" (14). Clara thinks deeply about her future marriage. She considers the worst case scenario as she speculates:

When you become famous and rich, and patients flock to your office, and fashionable people to your home, and everyone wants to know who you are and whence you came, you'll be obliged to bring out the governor, and the judge, and the rest of them. If you should refrain, in order to forestall embarrassing inquiries about my ancestry, I should have deprived you of something you are entitled to, something which has a real social value. And when people found out all about you, as they eventually would from some source, they would want to know—we Americans are a curious people—who your wife was, and you could only say—[John interrupts] 'The best and sweetest woman on earth, whom I love unspeakably' [Clara replies] 'you know that is not what I mean. You could only say—a miss Nobody, from Nowhere.' (14)

Clara believes that there will be a day when people will ask her and her fiancé where she comes from and who her parents are. She feels ashamed that she is of unknown parentage. Clara has some suspicion of her true racial heritage. Harding describes, "Other physical descriptions of Clara provide more subtle clues about her racial status. Blood and fingernails were often used as racial markers in 19th century fiction" (qtd. in Harding 313). Clara feels that she is different than her adoptive parents, and she wants to be able to see her racial status in her hand. Later she also mentions the distinction between her and her adoptive parents, and she knows "they were fair and I was dark" ("Her Virginia Mammy" 19). Clara needs information to confirm her racial ancestry.

Trying to soothe Clara, John tries to persuade Clara of her true worth and the insignificance of race. He describes humanity as "worms of the dust, and if we go back

far enough, each of us has had millions of ancestors” (14). John “voices Chesnutt’s core, liberal tenets: ‘Yet we are all made after God’s own image, and formed by his hand, for his ends; and therefore not to be lightly despised, even the humblest of us.... Our destiny lies in the future’” (qtd. In Ramsey 34). John tries to make Clara feel comfortable with ambiguous ancestry by observing that as “All worms of the dust; therefore, White and Black ancestors are the same (“Her Virginia Mammy” 14). He wants to make Clara satisfied with her life without knowing her history. While John describes humanity from his view, Clara acknowledges, “A woman is not like man; she cannot lose herself in theories and generalizations” (14). Clara describes for John her perspective; she does not see theories of science; as a woman, she focuses on matters of the heart.. Therefore, Clara needs to know her parentage to feel like a real woman.

Clara imagines maternal adoration that is more sentimental; she longs for an affectionate, loving mother,

to whose bosom she could fly when in trouble or distress, and to whom she could communicate her sorrows and trials; who would dry her tears and soothe her with caresses. Now, when even her kind foster-mother was gone, she felt still more the need of sympathy and companionship with her own sex; and when this little Mrs. Harper spoke to her so gently, she felt her heart respond instinctively. (18)

Because Clara is a lost person who needs guidance and sympathy in her own life, she talks to the first person who reveals sympathy toward her. She and Mrs. Harper meet each other in the dressing room when Clara is desperate to talk: “Enter Mrs. Harper, the woman with this valuable information, who is a visibly biracial friend of some of the

dancers. She and Clara find themselves alone in the ladies' dressing room" (Harding 313). This scene between Clara and Mrs. Harper helps Clara resolve her ambiguous parentage. Clara learns about her parentage from a person whom she does not imagine will help, but who offers the motherly affection Clara craves.

Mrs. Harper offers her help to Clara, and Clara welcomes this help and shares her story upon Mrs. Harper's request. She implores, "Tell me your story, child, and perhaps, if I cannot help you otherwise, I can tell you one that will make yours seem less sad" ("Her Virginia Mammy" 18). Clara describes that John loves her and wants to marry her, but she cannot marry him under her circumstances; she has to know her history before they get married; she also talks about her foster parents and how they adopted her.

Mrs. Harper tells Clara the story as Clara wants it to be, not as it is. Mrs. Harper chooses her words to create a double meaning, telling Clara that she knows her biological parents. She answers Clara when she asks her about her father and her mother without lying, "Your father was a Virginia gentleman, and belonged to one of the first families, the Staffords, of Melton County... your mother—also belonged to one of the first families of Virginia, and in her veins flowed some of the best blood of the Old Dominion" ("Her Virginia Mammy" 21-22). Mrs. Harper chooses the word "belonged" to describe Clara's blood parent. "Mrs. Harper's use of 'belonged' appears to refer to kinship, but could also refer to ownership—it could be that Clara's mother was a slave who literally 'belonged' to the family she names, the Fairfaxes. Readers suspect that the person she names as Clara's mother, Mary Fairfax, is in fact Mrs. Harper" (Harding 314). It is clear for the reader that slaves take their masters' family names. Mrs. Harper does not lie to Clara; she just uses the word "belonged" to explain Clara's parental ancestry.



Clara understands that her parents are members of these families; she does not think they are their slaves' families. "Of course, in the slave system ownership and kinship could be intertwined, since owners at times held a 'double relation of master and father,' to use Frederick Douglass's phrase" ("Her Virginia Mammy" 2). "Mrs. Harper's own 'olive complexion' suggests that she must have a genetic history that includes both Black and White ancestry (216). It is plausible that Mrs. Harper, a slave once owned by the Fairfax family, had a genetic relation to the Fairfax family as well. When Clara asks whether her mother was a Virginia belle, Mrs. Harper does not answer yes. Instead, she evades the question, answering instead that the Fairfaxes were the "bluest of the blue-bloods" (221). Her carefully indirect answer emphasizes the standing of the Fairfax family, but fails to confirm the standing of Clara's mother within that family. It seems likely that she was both a slave and unacknowledged family member (Harding 314).

Mrs. Harper admits that Clara's parents loved each other when Clara asks about them. Mrs. Harper describes the relationship between Clara's mother and father saying that "In the meantime he had met and loved your mother" ("Her Virginia Mammy" 22). Mrs. Harper does not say if they were married. She wants Clara to be proud of her parents. Mrs. Harper gives to Clara the answer to her prayers. Susan Fraiman explains the mother-daughter relationship in the story as a kind of romance. Fraiman posits that, "The fairy-tale romance is obvious: handsome doctor, little Clara...But there is also a new, competing plot that I call the mother-daughter romance: the compelling tie between Clara and the mother of whom she has always dreamed" (444). As a person seeking answers, Clara does not think deeply about Mrs. Harper's words; she wants more information

about her ancestry. Thirsty for knowledge of her parentage, Clara is kind and not demanding. She accepts the tale without any conflict.

Mrs. Harper does not lie to Clara at all; she just tells her a story from her view, and Clara believes it. From Mrs. Harper's story, Clara discovers that Mrs. Harper is her "colored" nurse when Mrs. Harper says about Clara's father, "He went with your mother and you—you were then just a year old—to Cincinnati, to settle up some business connected with his estate. When he had completed his business, he embarked on the *Pride of St. Louis* with you and your mother and a colored nurse" ("Her Virginia Mammy" 22). Although Clara knows that Mrs. Harper was her nurse—her mammy, she does not think much about her nurse from whose breasts she suckled: "If Mrs. Harper was Clara's wet-nurse, she could not have breastfed her if she had not given birth to a child of her own—what happened to that child?" (Harding 316). This is a question which Clara does not consider at all.

Clara allows herself to believe the story without considering its flaws. She has already made a decision not to marry John if she does not know her parentage. To Clara, it would be immoral to put John's social position at risk. Mrs. Harper's story allows her to move forward with her marriage. Clara exclaims, "Listen, John, I have a wonderful story to tell you" ("Her Virginia Mammy" 24). Then she tells him Mrs. Harper's story. At this point of Chesnutt's short story, Clara's moral dilemma is resolved: "What is startling and provocative is that [Her Virginia Mammy] remembers and revives the original mother.... Clara's fantasy of this mother disrupts the male-female plot and problematizes the marriage toward which it inevitably works" (Fraiman 445). Because Clara feels that she learns about her original mother, she can now take a husband.

Chesnutt depicts John's moral decision in the final moment of the story. As John hears Mrs. Harper's story, he makes the same moral decision as earlier; he does not care about Clara's ancestry. He cares only that she will be his wife, and she will carry his name, Winthrop, instead of the name Clara just learned: Stafford. After John catches sight of Clara's and Mrs. Harper's resemblance to one another, he still does not care about the ancestry of his love, Clara:

He listened attentively and sympathetically, at certain points taking his eyes from Clara's face and glancing keenly at Mrs. Harper, who was listening intently. As he looked from one to the other he noticed the resemblance between them, and something in his expression caused Mrs. Harper's eyes to fall, and then glance up appealingly. ("Her Virginia Mammy" 24)

John decides that he still wants to marry Clara even though he knows Clara is not pure white. Clara accepts John's proposal because she thinks she is completely white. According to Ramsey, "Clara, in marrying Winthrop, honestly assumes her heritage is wholly White" (35). Although John is definitely white, he does not have biases toward Clara's real identity, but she does.

Mrs. Harper's moral decision involves a sacrifice; she must deny herself the opportunity to know her daughter in exchange for her daughter's future security. Although John accepts the truth, the reader knows that Clara cannot accept the truth. Mrs. Harper has insight into Clara's life and future. Mrs. Harper's decision makes both women happy; it makes Clara happy because of her white ancestry, and it lets Mrs. Harper forge a bond with her daughter as her "Virginia Mammy."

Chesnutt presents the suffering of the color line issue because, as a writer, he describes experiences that he understood as a mixed-race man. He shows the challenges of racism in the story when John says, referring to the African-American dance students, “‘One would think’ he suggested, ‘that the Whitest of them would find their position painful and more or less pathetic; to be so White and yet to be classed as black—so near and yet so far’” (“Her Virginia Mammy” 17). Chesnutt understands that if Clara knows her racial identity that her marriage to John would be illegal. As a mulatto woman, Clara would have few legal rights. His characters in “Her Virginia Mammy” have to make moral decisions that protect their positions related to race. More specifically Mrs. Harper’s and Dr. Winthrop’s decisions enable Clara to pass as White. Chesnutt constructs the plot so that Clara never has to confront her mixed-race identity. She understands the prejudice of the color line and believes that she has to be white in order to marry the doctor. The audience recognizes that the emotional sacrifice of Mrs. Harper and the noble acceptance of Dr. Winthrop enable Clara to fulfill her dream of marrying a white man.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

Charles Waddell Chesnutt's short stories illustrate the color line in the Jim Crow South. Today they can be seen as documents of the ethical decisions mixed race people faced and as romantic and dramatic evidence of the pain and suffering of African Americans of all shades. Both stories from Chesnutt's collection, *The Wife of his Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* (1899), "The Sheriff's Children" and "Her Virginia Mammy" depict the intimate struggles of mixed-race families. In each story, adult characters meet a long-lost parent for the first time. Both Tom in "The Sheriff's Children" and Clara in "Her Virginia Mammy" are the children of unions between white fathers and black mothers; both have grown up without knowing their real parents. However, Tom was raised as a black child while Clara was raised thinking that she is white. As both children face their parents for the first time, the readers see the characters' struggle to realize their identities and make moral choices based on their social and racial positions. Tom, having been raised as a black boy, cannot reconcile with his white father and dies tragically as a result. Clara, on the other hand, is released through her mother's false story so that she can identify herself as white and marry Dr. Winthrop. In "The Sheriff's Children," knowledge of the truth hurts the protagonist. Tom cannot face the issue that his father has denied his duty to his son. In "Her Virginia Mammy," Clara

receives happiness based upon her mother's manipulation of her birth story. These two stories, one a tragedy and the other a melodrama offering a "formulaic, unambiguous rendering of experience" demonstrate Chesnutt's painful view of racist society (Chandler 6). For Tom, his white father provides him with nothing—neither name, money, nor protection. For Clara, her black mother provides her with her name, but in so doing, Mrs. Harper diminishes herself from Clara's mother to her "colored" mammy.

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